War on the horizon
Infrastructural vulnerability in frontline communities of the Donbas

Anastasiya Ryabchuk

Abstract: Post-Soviet deindustrialization and the economic collapse of the 1990s led to a decline in the significance of the Donbas coal-mining region both economically and symbolically, while the start of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2014 aggravated the sense of isolation and fragmentation. The combined effects of these two forms of violence led to technocratic governance, in part promoted and encouraged by the international humanitarian organizations that entered the region after 2014. Where war and neoliberalism narrowed horizons for good life, fragmented technocratic governance limited horizons for political engagement. It also ignored and neglected the potential strengths of inherited socialist state infrastructure that could offer a safety net and a point of reference for citizens' engagement with the world and each other.

Keywords: Donbas, emptiness, frontline communities, humanitarianism, infrastructural vulnerability, Russian war in Ukraine

In April 2021, at 10:00 a.m., my overnight train from Kyiv arrived in Kostiantynivka, a relatively small industrial city of seventy thousand inhabitants. Prior to 2014, it had been just a brief stop *en route* from Kyiv to Donetsk, but since the line of contact between the separatist and the Ukrainian government forces stabilized in 2014, it has become the last station served by this train and dubbed "train Kyiv-war". An international NGO had commissioned me to conduct fieldwork in two frontline villages, and my driver had already been waiting for me on the platform in a blue vest with the NGO logo.[1] My primary task during this visit was to identify the most vulnerable groups and their most urgent needs, and thus to justify the choice of beneficiaries and projects to be implemented by the NGO that employed me. A personal motivation for this article (and also a bias that I, as a researcher, am aware of) came from the unease I felt with this role to justify technocratic responses in the context of increasing infrastructural vulnerability of frontline communities. Humanitarian projects were searching for vulnerable individuals who could be helped, but the vulnerability experienced by people in frontline communities was not so much personal but infrastructural—related to a deterioration of crucial social infrastructure due to the ongoing war and the slow violence of post-Soviet transformations. It was

Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology 96 (2023): 46–56

doi:10.3167/fcl.2023.960104

felt collectively, and expressed by my respondents as a sense of isolation and fragmentation because the previously known infrastructural networks were no longer there. New internal borders that emerged in 2014 destroyed rail and road transport systems and made employment options more limited as crucial industry remained "on the other side" of the border, thereby reducing available healthcare, education, and social protection options. Residents repeatedly spoke of "war on the horizon" both in a physical sense, hearing the sounds of fighting or witnessing occasional shelling in their villages, and in a more existential sense, as a narrowing down of horizons of hope and possible futures.

This article discusses how receding horizons are related to both the war and neoliberal state policies that followed post-Soviet deindustrialization and the economic collapse of the 1990s. It shows how the combined effects of these two forms of violence led to fragmented and technocratic governance in frontline communities. This type of governance was, in part, promoted and encouraged by the international humanitarian organizations that entered the region after 2014 and that had been taken for granted as the only possible way of doing politics in a war-affected region before the full-scale invasion of 2022. If war and neoliberalism narrowed horizons for a good life, fragmented technocratic governance limited horizons for political engagement. It also ignored and neglected the potential strengths of an inherited socialist state infrastructure that could offer a safety net and a point of reference for citizens' engagement with the world and each other.

The very concept of horizons is politically laden, intriguing and optimistic, even utopian. Horizons mark for us the limits of what we can see, but not the limits of the world. As we move forward, the horizon moves with us, and things that seemed distant are now easier to grasp. It is possible to "broaden horizons" and to look at the horizon as an invitation to explore and engage. But in the frontline communities, horizons are sad and heavy; they mark losses, not possibilities; and they close space down instead of opening it up. I was carrying out my research at a moment when there was much tension in the air: the Russian army was conducting military training exercises at the border with Ukraine (preparations for the invasion less than a year later); there was increased shelling in frontline communities; and two of my other research sites canceled planned visits for safety reasons. This was after the start of the war in Donbas in 2014 followed by the Minsk accords and the occasionally violated ceasefire, but prior to the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. The residents, local government officials, and NGO representatives were aware of the fragility of the terrain and the difficulties of long-term planning. As a result, much of the planning by individuals, government agencies, and humanitarian organizations during that period was short-term and technocratic, addressing the most pressing needs but hesitant to plan long-term.

The local residents who came out to greet me gave me a quick tour of their village and also pointed toward the horizon. The spoil tips from the Horlivka coal mine were less than 15 kilometers to the east and on the other side of the line of contact. "Many of our men used to commute to work there. But the mine was blown up, flooded, and *anyway* it is now on the other side." At the other end, 15 km southwest, they pointed to the smoke from the Adviyivka coke-chemical plant. It was within walking distance of the Donetsk airport that had been renovated for UEFA Euro 2012 but was destroyed in 2014. The little forest just outside the village was a favorite hunting, picnic, and barbeque spot, but hunting had been banned (as shooting could be confused for violation of the ceasefire), and the forest might still have landmines or be used occasionally as a hiding spot by soldiers. The railway crossing was blocked, and a bit further one could see a destroyed railway bridge.

Everything was nearby yet inaccessible. All my informants alluded to the formerly vibrant production networks: Donetsk was the fifth largest city in Ukraine, according to the 2001 census, with a population of about one million.

Numerous smaller cities and even villages like the ones I was visiting formed an industrial network, centered on coal mining and heavy industry. Donbas was responsible for 16 percent of the gross domestic product and 25 percent of Ukrainian exports, so war had significant consequences not just for the immediate region but for all of Ukraine. Economic decline began with post-Soviet deindustrialization and economic disintegration of the 1990s, followed by neoliberal reforms in exchange for IMF and World Bank loans (Yurchenko 2017). It was aggravated by war-related physical damage and destruction of industry, highways, and railway networks, and the inability to access these industrial sites from the Ukrainian-controlled side due to the emergence of new internal "borders". The coke-chemical plant in Avdiyivka was the only large industrial enterprise in the vicinity of the villages that remained on the Ukrainian-controlled side. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the coal supplies had become more limited with many of the mines remaining in separatist-controlled regions, and as a consequence, the plant could not function at its full capacity.

Pre-war and wartime infrastructural emptying

Before 2014, residents of the two villages in my study commuted to Donetsk and neighboring cities for work and access to essential social infrastructure, such as hospitals, centers for administrative services, and institutions of higher education. Moreover, many urban residents had relatives and summer houses in nearby rural communities, while elderly village dwellers kept in touch with their children in cities, looked after grandchildren during summer vacations, and passed on sacks of potatoes and canned vegetables. These networks were abruptly cut off in 2014. Frontline communities some 10–20 kilometers from Donetsk became isolated economically, geographically, and socially. Sophie Lambroschini (2020: 4) observes that this new frontline "runs through a typical European conurbation, a succession of interdependent company towns of coal, metal, and chemical industries assisted by water and electricity-producing infrastructure" and invites readers to imagine what the disruptions on trade and infrastructure would look like if the frontline were to run through similar conurbations like the German Ruhrgebiet or the English Midlands.[2]

Of course, Soviet industrialization efforts in the Donbas were in many ways problematic. As witnessed by Hiroaki Kuromiya (2003), the growth of the significance of this region during the first five-year plan coincided with collectivization and the artificial famine of 1932–1933 that killed millions of Ukrainian peasants. Employment in coal mines and adjacent metallurgical and chemical plants offered many peasants fleeing from famine a chance of survival in this newly constructed Soviet industrial utopia. As Daria Tsymbaliuk (2022) writes, in pre-Soviet days the steppe of Donbas was portrayed as boring nothingness, as "a void, as emptiness, lending itself to imperial, colonial, and industrial imaginaries of constructing a world from scratch." Soviet-heavy industry in Donbas came to fill that empty space and was characterized by intensive extraction of resources (with high levels of natural damage; Mariupol being the most polluted city in Ukraine) and the glorification of coal miners as exemplary Soviet citizens (with myths of Stakhanov's heroic overproduction). At the same time, this system offered miners numerous privileges, and more importantly—structured Donbas residents' entire social lives around its centers of production. Infrastructural networks that took charge of all their everyday needs, including transport, education, healthcare, culture, and recreation were often organized directly by industrial enterprises. Furthermore, considering the importance of coal and steel in Soviet value chains, the state had to develop transport infrastructure, resulting in a region well-connected via rail and sea (the Azov sea port of Mariupol being particularly important for coal and steel exports).

The fall of the USSR triggered deindustrialization in the Donbas and led to unemploy-

ment and the disintegration of social life. There was once again an othering of the Donbas: this time, as decaying gray industrial remnants of the old order—a region that is somehow "lagging behind" with its backward paternalistic values, outdated industry, and inefficient Soviet governance models. Furthermore, the vicious cycle of violence continues today with Russia's fueling of the war resulting in destruction of the remaining infrastructure and industry, erasing human lives once again, polluting the area with landmines and chemicals, and failing to see real physical space behind imperial imaginary. "War on the horizon" for frontline communities of the Donbas means not only that there is not much to cherish in the present but also that there is not much to look forward to in the future.

Thus, frontline communities of the Donbas were experiencing the intersecting effects of the "slow violence" (Vorbrugg 2019) of post-Soviet economic disintegration and neoliberal reforms, on the one hand, and war-caused disconnection and destruction, on the other. However, ordinary residents often did not distinguish between the two forms of emptying. They blame the destruction of economic networks on the ongoing war, even though this process began with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. For instance, the number of workers employed in coal mining has decreased from more than a million in 1991 to less than 40,000 in 2000, and out of 33 state-owned coal mines, 29 are not profitable and require subsidies (Bohushenko et al. 2020). On the other hand, they blame the local government for not addressing the problems of war-related destruction of infrastructure, as if it were mainly about the local government's corruption or negligence and not the extreme violence of war.

In the two villages I visited, it seemed at times that local government officials were using the heightened interest of humanitarian NGOs in their communities to "patch up holes" and secure foreign donor funding in what would have normally been the municipality's duties. These were specific small-scale efforts that were manageable and where NGO assistance could be obtained. Officials of the municipality could thus "tick the box" and write a report to show that at least something had been fixed. Five new water wells were installed in 2020, a ramp was added at the entrance to the rural council office to make it wheelchair accessible, and some leaflets about domestic violence prevention had been printed and posted at all municipal buildings with the hotline phone number written on them in bold letters. These seemed like initiatives any rural council could do, both in the east and the west of the country, with or without a war raging on. But being at the frontline offered a certain kind of "privilege" in securing humanitarian NGO funds for these kinds of activities. Consequently, NGOs were also happy to "fill a niche", as it was easier for them to justify the need to install a ramp in a frontline village of the Donbas than in a village in another part of Ukraine. The war required them to intervene somehow, and funds were redirected from more general rural poverty reduction projects to war-torn areas. NGOs started commissioning social scientists to interview municipal workers, local activists, and ordinary residents in the Donbas about the most pressing needs, and such requests collected on the ground made funding applications and reports more persuasive.

At other times, war-related damage was indeed overwhelming for the rural council and required humanitarian NGO-targeted assistance. Thanks to NGOs, library windows, shattered by bombings, were finally replaced; the leaky roof in the kindergarten was repaired; social workers received new bikes to deliver groceries for the homebound single elderly; a mobile doctor's visit was organized to take blood tests and do ultrasounds. But in all cases, whether we were dealing with the consequences of a "slow violence" of the decades between 1991 and 2014 or the extreme violence of war since 2014, being at the frontline gave both the local government and the NGOs an excuse not to plan beyond the horizon of just a few months or a few small-scale projects ahead: just haphazard attempts to prevent everything from collapsing.

Receding horizons and fragmented governance

The first layer that contributes to a sense of fragmentation and a narrowing of horizons and the disruption of Soviet infrastructures "built on the assumption of political—and thus technological—unity" (Sgibnev and Rekhviashvili 2021):

> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, severe funding cuts, mismanaged privatization, inadequate maintenance, and widespread depopulation resulted in extensive failures in transport, water, heating, electricity, or healthcare provision. . . . Regional conflicts resulted in borders cutting through elaborate railway, pipeline, or electricity grids. Yet, perhaps most significantly, the shift from a centralized infrastructural regime to individualized, fragmented, and ailing systems affected the relation between citizens and the state. (ibid.)

The second layer is the war on the horizon. The Russian war in the Donbas began in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR 2021), between April 14, 2014 and June 30, 2021, there were approximately 13,200–13,400 confirmed deaths (at least 3,901 civilians, about 4,200 Ukrainian servicepersons, and about 5,800 Russian-backed militants), and a further 30,000 wounded.[3] NGO reports suggest that up to two million people were displaced by war, largely to neighboring towns and villages within Donetsk and Luhansk oblast (half of all internally displaced persons). Of those living in the vicinity of the line of contact, up to two-thirds can be classified as "vulnerable" (old age, reduced mobility, chronic illness or disability, single mothers or mothers of three and more children, Roma, HIV+ status, etc.). While the military situation largely stabilized by 2017–2018, the demarcation line became more clear: only a handful of official crossings were established, local government structures were replaced by "military-civil administrations", an embargo on trades with separatist-controlled areas was introduced and trans-frontline monetary circulation became more difficult as separatist-controlled areas introduced the Russian rouble. Frequent breakdowns of water and electricity systems due to shelling often resulted in industries temporarily suspending operations (Lamborschini 2020), while flooding and destruction of coal mines could spread further to neighboring mines that were part of the same basin.

The sense of being geographically "cut off" and infrastructurally vulnerable was aggravated by ongoing administrative changes—changes that have happened throughout Ukraine but have particular symbolic meaning in frontline communities. The decentralization reform launched in 2014 was aimed at greater economic and political autonomy of new administrative units from the "center" in Kyiv (CMU 2022). Many communities, both urban and rural, welcomed this reform as a path to greater self-sufficiency and self-determination. Ironically, Donbas was at the forefront of decentralization demands as early as 1989 when miners went on strike for Ukraine's independence and their region's greater autonomy from Moscow. They expected more of their resources and profits from exports to remain in the region rather than being channeled to Moscow, or later Kyiv. However, the war that began in 2014 turned decentralization reform into a new burden for frontline communities. As bigger cities remained on the "other side" in 2014, the Ukrainian government attempted to reconfigure borders for new administrative units in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In my case study, the two villages were attached to Ocheretyne, a town with only 4,000 residents, 10 times fewer than the former regional center of Yasynuvata. The village dwellers were still confused about who was responsible for what, and where to turn to if they had any needs or questions. For example, water and electricity were provided to the general public from Adviyivka, but the center for administrative services had been moved

to Ocheretyne—although many village dwellers were unaware of its existence. The hospital in Avdiyivka seemed to be closer, but for some reason patients were sent to Kostiantynivka, which was farther away. A person may have had to travel to three or four different cities for one administrative or social service question.

The fractured healthcare system is a vivid example of how the socio-economic context in frontline communities was marked by the disruption of previously existing networks and aggravated by decentralization reform. There was one ambulance in the newly created district center of Ocheretyne, but the local hospital was too small and lacked doctors so patients often needed to go to Kostiantynivka anyway. The local ambulance would stop at a checkpoint and wait for the next ambulance from the city to pick up the patient and take them to the hospital. "We sometimes wait for a whole hour for the ambulance to reach us—it's a better idea to just hire a car and go to the hospital on our own, but it costs six hundred hryvnias [£15], and not everyone has that money, given that a monthly pension is two thousand hryvnias [£50]," said one of my interlocutors.

Even if they had found a car, people often didn't know where to go and whom to contact, as suggested b y another interlocutor: "Formerly our family doctor knew all the specialists in Donetsk, Horlivka, and Yasynuvata. She could refer us to this or that hospital, knowing that they have the best doctors. But now she says, 'I don't know who to refer you to, all the doctors either remain on the other side, or moved to Kharkiv, Dnipro or Kyiv.'" As I entered a local clinic that employed just one nurse and offered consultations by a visiting family doctor once a week, I noticed how cold it was inside, even on a sunny April day. A nurse commented: "We ask our patients to let us know ahead of time if they are planning to come, especially with infants and young children. That way, if we know they will come, we have enough time to find some coal and warm up the room."

Other fractured networks included transport for both commuting to work and for family reasons, and transport to ensure economic activity, economic networks—jobs that "remain in occupied territories", jobs lost due to destruction of industrial objects, infrastructural networks of administrative and social services, in particular healthcare, and social networks with family and friends. Such networks give people a sense of order and security, a feeling that "everything works as a mechanism", and they know their algorithms of action in different life situations. This is the infrastructure individuals are most conscious of inhabiting and depend on in the pursuit of "ordinary living", the patterns of life that are taken for granted, so their destruction leads to a sense of void.

The demand for infrastructure is "a demand for a certain kind of inhabitable ground" (Butler 2016). Thus, the destruction of previously existing networks was much more than a list of industrial and infrastructural objects that remain destroyed or inaccessible due to war. It was about infrastructural vulnerability that leads to a sense of fragmentation, of narrowing down of both spatial and temporal horizons. There is no point in looking far to the horizon toward Donetsk, because one can no longer get there. There is no point in planning strategically long term because it would require a kind of investment in a fragile and uncertain terrain that neither the state, NGOs, nor the individuals are willing or able to make.

From citizens to beneficiaries

Humanitarianism offers a division of the world into states that are able to adequately care for their citizens and states that are unable to do so (Dunn 2017). Thus, humanitarians come to places where they expect to find emptiness, and where any contribution is gratefully accepted. As the state, NGOs and local residents have settled into a kind of "new normal" after the beginning of the war in 2014, this temporality of fragmented emergency relief is becoming more prevalent and replacing other forms of social engagement. More strategic planning would

have to be based either on the hopeful premise of Ukraine regaining control over temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts or on the more pessimistic assumption that the current spatial configuration will be permanent and that the state needs to make long-term plans assuming that Donetsk will always remain beyond the horizon. Both options depend on "big politics" beyond local authorities' or the residents' control and are difficult for them to articulate, so instead they settle on short-term technocratic governance in an extremely politicized situation (namely war).

Over time it also becomes more difficult for local government and development aid projects to justify the need for continued humanitarian assistance. Instead, eight years into the war in the Donbas, many of them felt pressured to reduce projects that "simply offer food, hygiene items and coal for heating" and instead come up with projects that will "strengthen communities", "promote resilience", "build capacities" and offer "skills trainings" and "awareness raising campaigns" instead of handing out humanitarian aid that is somewhat dismissively labeled as "humanitarka", as "mere hand-outs, nothing more", even humiliating, reserved "for beggars". The vilification of humanitarian handouts goes along with the condemnation of "paternalism" of local authorities: in the liberal discourse skills need to be taught instead of the distribution of the proverbial fish.[4]

In the frontline villages that I visited, the all-encompassing language of "market integration", combined with technocratic projects imported from other regions with little understanding of the local context, paradoxically led to even further isolation from the global markets and production networks. NGOs tried to encourage entrepreneurism among former coal miners or steelworkers, offering trainings in IT, or on the other extreme, giving out greenhouses and cows. Somehow it did not occur to donors that a village of five hundred dwellers is not necessarily an isolated rural area with agriculture as the main income-generating activity (my respondents complained that they worked in industry and never planted anything in their lives and did not know how to milk cows). A similar project of "creating income-generating opportunities for rural women of the Donbas" offered women sewing machines and encouraged them to produce clothing for the local market, ignoring the fact that this region was flooded with free donated second-hand clothing, and demand for new locally sewn clothing was limited (leaving aside the cost of mostly imported fabrics).[5]

Technocratic project-centered temporalities of humanitarian NGOs create dependency and do not leave sustainable structures behind. Despite the ambitious humanitarian newspeak of resilience, capacity-building, community development and market integration, humanitarian efforts in frontline communities remain fragmented and haphazard, with long lists of vulnerable groups. Who will qualify for aid this time? My informants complained:"Why do the elderly get everything? They can soon open shops in their houses, selling canned food and hygiene items!" "Oh, but single mothers never leave with empty hands! It looks like it's better to hide your husband and pretend you don't have one!" "Why do they set this stupid rule that you must be over 60? I'm also handicapped, so what that I'm 57? How am I less in need than them?"

As people living in frontline communities of the Donbas are turned from citizens into "beneficiaries", their human rights become dependent on identities assigned to them by these very NGOs: they can only receive social benefits and have their basic needs satisfied if they fit into one of the "vulnerable categories" defined by this or that humanitarian project, and only if this project happens to receive donor funding. Michel Agier observed this situation in relationship to refugees: "Human rights of this kind disappear as soon as the local humanitarian government is interrupted by decision of the UN and aid agencies. The refugees are then victims twice over: of the war and forced displacement that led them there, and then of their political powerlessness in the face of the power of the humanitarian organizations over their lives" (Agier 2008: 157).

Kate Brown (2011) warns against the use of the term "vulnerability" to further single out

and marginalize certain categories of people. My informants usually did not complain about their personal "vulnerability" and did not single out their special status or special needs. On the contrary, time and again they shifted my attention to difficulties faced not only by them, but by everyone in their communities. Moreover, if their communities had developed social infrastructure, they would not have been "vulnerable". If there was a developed network of schools, preschools, and afterschool activities, mothers would not be "vulnerable" but just mothers. If there was adequate public transport and paved streets, people with reduced mobility would also not feel as "vulnerable". Thus, one of the key problems with a focus on vulnerability is lack of attention to the structural causes of this vulnerability. Unlike an infant that is vulnerable just because of its age and dependency on adults, my informants were vulnerable because of the demise of the welfare state and infrastructural decay in their communities. Instead of addressing this decay by strengthening the welfare state and improving public infrastructure, humanitarian NGOs ignored these questions altogether, presenting themselves as the only agents acting in spaces of emptiness.

Behind many NGOs' success stories, we can see the structural problems that cannot be addressed in the framework of humanitarian emergency relief. For instance, when we read about an NGO buying bicycles for social workers as their "biggest dream come true", we can try to imagine the distances that these social workers need to cover in any kind of weather every day to reach homebound elderly people in remote villages with food and medicines and question the absence of a regular bus route. When we read about a school installing indoor toilets for girls in the framework of a humanitarian project on girls' sexual education, we can ask why many rural schools still do not have indoor toilets and teenage girls end up changing their sanitary pads in the cold. Or why the school administration is forced to apply for donor funding under the umbrella project of girls' sexual education (what about the boys' toilets?) and worry whether their project proposal will be accepted ("because it's not really about sexual education, but it's a more urgent need"). Further, we read about a humanitarian agency mobilizing women to identify their own needs and find out that one of the most pressing needs was lack of ATMs in their village. This caused the elderly to hand over their bank cards with pin codes to neighbors who were heading to a nearby town and could thus withdraw their pension. In communities that don't get such humanitarian "mobilizing" and where the elderly still struggle to receive their pensions, as well as in separatist-controlled areas, the elderly often have no choice but to lend their cards to neighbors or brokers who will withdraw the money for them for a fee.

Such moving stories as that of a teenage girl changing sanitary pads in a cold dark outdoor toilet, an elderly *babushka* entrusting her banking card with meager pension to a neighbor, or a social worker whose biggest dream is a new bike create images of frontline communities where humanitarian NGOs come to fill in the grave need in spaces that are lacking and empty. These stories may be common for many rural areas throughout the post-Soviet space, but in the frontline communities of the Donbas, the context of war on the horizon creates this feeling of emergency where everything is destroyed and people urgently need this external humanitarian aid to alleviate suffering. As a result, people increasingly take "states of emergency" for granted, and agree to a technocratic depoliticization. In an extremely politicized context of the war, it seems that all—the residents, the state, and the donors—can only act on this technocratic register, as if none were able to work upon broadening the horizon or making it more accessible. The war intersects with post-Soviet slow violence, thus doubly disabling political action.

"It became too loud, so we had to flee"

An accent on emergencies that are addressed through humanitarian projects, and on vulnerable categories that are viewed as "pure victims", leads to depoliticization of social problems as

issues that require "technical" rather than political solutions. International NGOs build a hierarchical network of humanitarian aid from "non-vulnerable" donors to "vulnerable" recipients, thus taking over the functions of redistribution of economic resources and receiving the power to regulate social relations and dictate their conditions. Local dwellers are seen as lacking and deprived of political agency—the grateful recipients of aid. Naomi Klein (2005) observes how with the rise of disaster capitalism, when victims of war or natural disasters struggle to find shelter and food, political organizing "can seem like unimaginable luxury". And yet, when people demand schools and hospitals, roads and public transport, it's not so much about their personal vulnerabilities but about infrastructural preconditions for political action and our collective coexistence as social beings, aware of their human vulnerability in the face of the socio-economic consequences of war and of neoliberal state policies, and mobilizing to resist and develop networks of social support and protection.

The first draft of this article was written prior to the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. The villages where this fieldwork was conducted are still controlled by Ukraine, but are currently a site of heavy fighting. In July, Ukrainian government called for the obligatory evacuation of all residents still remaining in the Donetsk oblast—evacuation is organized free of charge, housing in safer regions and social payments are offered right away. "It has become too loud, so we had to flee. There is almost nobody left in our village now," said one of the NGO workers in a brief chat this spring. It is interesting how she described the village through sounds: after Russia's full-scale invasion the place became "too loud" to be the site of humanitarian aid. "Too loud" is now a synonym for empty and abandoned villages of the Donbas, and the international NGOs were among the first to abandon them. But free evacuation trains continue running since the first day of war, postal workers continue traveling to villages by bike to hand out pensions and other social benefits, and doctors and nurses continue treating patients, including those wounded by shelling. It turns out that in times of war, dilapidated state infrastructure is more reliable and efficient than the innovative aid projects that were introduced to the area by international NGOs.

Charles Tilly (1990) and many after him observed that there is a relation between state-making and war-making: the imperative of waging war has historically pushed state centralization and growth. At a more basic level, the dynamics of warfare have implications for political regimes and institutions. Something very similar can be said of humanitarianism: what I observed in Donbas is a humanitarian economy that feeds off war, a defense-humanitarian-industrial complex (Carbonnier 2015; di Cosmo et al. 2021). But a humanitarian economy that grew around the frontline of a limited war has been further transformed, and largely wiped away, by the more all-encompassing invasion.

The anthropological and sociological literature on post-socialist states (Rodgers and Verdery 2013) has largely focused on the transformations of states—and frequently, on their retreat, making space for NGOs including humanitarians. But what has perhaps been missed, and what I feel the most recent developments in the frontline communities of the Donbas points to, is the resilience of these state institutions, and their importance for the people concerned. The war doesn't immediately "generate" state institutions, and it's simply too early to say how it will transform them,[6] but, clearly enough, it has demonstrated just how vital they are, especially at a time when humanitarian projects, governed by entirely different global logics, retreat to prioritize the safety of their staff.

Acknowledgments

Part of this text initially appeared as fieldnotes on the *Emptiness blog* (Ryabchuk 2021). I am grateful to Dace Dzenovska and Volodymyr Artiukh for their invitation to develop these field-

notes into a scholarly publication for *Focaal* and for all their support and encouragement along the way. I am also grateful to Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (Paris) for hosting me as a PAUSE scholar-at-risk from the first days of Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus offering a safe environment in which to continue my academic work. Special thanks also to Center for Advanced Study (Sofia) for offering me a Gerda Henkel Fellowship to complete all the necessary revisions to this article.

Anastasiya Ryabchuk is associate professor in sociology at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine, and Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Her research interests include poverty and vulnerability, and anthropology of humanitarianism in the frontline communities of the Donbas.
E-mail: anastasia.riabchuk@gmail.com
ORCID:https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1206-1279

Notes

1. The numerous NGOs operating in the Donbas since the start of the war in 2014 range from large international humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross or Doctors without Borders to religious organizations such as Caritas (Catholic) or Diakonie (Lutheran) to more thematically focused organizations like Right to Protection, Norwegian Refugee Council, or People in Need. Despite their differences, they all share a hierarchical international structure, with donor funds coming from wealthier "first-world" countries to poor, war-torn regions.
2. She offers numerous examples of the disruption. For instance, of the two million residents of frontline communities on the Ukrainian-controlled side, 70 percent had to change their daily movements, which involved detours to work or not sending children to school. Critical infrastructure is constantly under attack: between January and June 2019 alone, there were more than 50 violent incidents affecting water infrastructure (Lambroschini 2020: 4).
3. While in the first year of the conflict about a third of all casualties were civilians, in 2019–2021 they were no more than 5 percent. The total number of casualties also decreased significantly in these last years.
4. Changes of discourse in project proposals and reports were observed by anthropologists of humanitarianism worldwide. Peter Redfield (2012) describes humanitarians' "antipolitics" that refuses political language and logic. In his view, both "rule-generating bureaucratic expertise" and "passionate claims to moral value" are responsible for this depoliticization of language and practice (Redfield 2012: 452). Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre (2015) observed important discursive changes in international organizations' reports (looking at the case of World Bank reports since the 1950s) with a shift from description of material outcomes of their aid to issues of governance. They suggest that as a result, reports turned into "strangely metaphysical documents, whose protagonists are often, not economic agents, but principles—and principles of so universal a nature, it's impossible to oppose them" (Moretti and Pestre 2015: 15).
5. Similarly, Deema Kaneef (2020) showed how international NGO implementation of a sewing project in a rural Ukrainian community in Odessa region, aggravated economic remoteness and isolation of the village. By simply importing a project idea that was successful in India, international donors ignored the previous economic networks and infrastructure already present in the area that could be built upon, and after two years of donor funding were over, the project was curbed.

References

Agier, Michel. 2008. *On the margins of the world: Refugee experience today*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bohushenko, Anna, Kostiantyn Krynytskyi, Mariya Koval-Honchar, eds. 2020. *Майбутнє справедливої трансформації в Україні: сприйняття в шахтарських містечках* [The future of just transition in Ukraine: Perceptions in small mining towns]. Report by Ekodiya and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Ukraine. https://ecoaction.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/just_transition_ua2020_uk.pdf

Brown, Kate. 2011. "'Vulnerability': Handle with care." *Ethics and Social Welfare* 5 (3): 313–321.

Butler, Judith. 2016. "Rethinking vulnerability and resistance." In *Vulnerability in resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, 12–28. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carbonnier, Gilles. 2015. *Humanitarian economics: War, disaster and the global aid market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CMU (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine). 2022. "Реформа децентралізації" [Decentralization reform]. https://www.kmu.gov.ua/diyalnist/reformi/efektivne-vryaduvannya/reforma-decentralizaciyi (accessed September 26, 2022).

Di Cosmo, Nicola, ed. 2021. *Rebel economies: Warlords, insurgents, humanitarians*. London: Lexington Books.

Dunn, Elizabeth. 2017. *No path home: Humanitarian camps and the grief of displacement*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kaneff, Deema. 2020. "'The market is far away'. Global connections and economic remoteness in rural Ukraine." *Europe-Asia Studies* 73 (4): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1843602.

Klein, Naomi. 2005. "The rise of disaster capitalism." *The Nation*. April 14, 2005. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/rise-disaster-capitalism/.

Kuromiya, Hiroaki. 2003. *Freedom and terror in the Donbas. A Ukrainian-Russian borderland, 1870s–1990s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lambroschini, Sophie. 2020. *Water in conflict: Five years after the Minsk ceasefire agreements, the unresolved issue of clean water supply to civilians in Donbas. Adaptation, limitations and outlines of cooperation*. CivilM+ report.

Moretti, Franco, and Dominique Pestre. 2015. *Bankspeak. The language of World Bank Reports, 1946–2012*. Literary Lab. Pamphlet 9. USA. Stanford.

OHCHR (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner). 2021. *Доповідь щодо ситуації з правами людини в Україні. 1 лютого – 31 липня 2021* [Report on the situation with human rights in Ukraine 1 February – 31 July 2021)]. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/32ndReportUkraine-ua.pdf?fbclid=IwAR29zHc7XZwqcRGgHhc2yHqlUGWMtUHyf3D83B9bv6OAq7FWbASGAileSGo.

Redfield, Peter. 2012. "Humanitarianism." In *A companion to moral anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 451–467. Oxford: Wiley & Sons.

Rodgers, Douglas, and Katherine Verdery. 2013. "Postsocialist societies: Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union." In *The handbook of sociocultural anthropology*, edited by James Carrier and Deborah Gewetz, 439–455. London: Bloomsbury.

Ryabchuk, Anastasiya. 2021. "'War on the horizon': Fieldnotes on infrastructural vulnerability in frontline communities of the Donbas." *Emptiness blog*, May 27, 2021, https://emptiness.eu/field-reports/war-on-the-horizon-fieldnotes-on-infrastructural-vulnerability-in-frontline-communities-of-the-donbas/.

Sgibnev, Wladimir, and Rekhviashvili, Lela. 2021. "One modernity lost, the other out of reach. Contested post-Soviet infrastructures." *Left-East*. April 30, 2021. https://lefteast.org/author/wladimir-sgibnev-and-lela-rekhviashvili/.

Tilly, Charles. 1990. *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990–1990*. London: Blackwell.

Tsymbaliuk, Darya. 2022. "Erasure: Russian imperialism, my research on the Donbas and I." *Kajet Journal*. Accessed on September 26, 2022. https://kajetjournal.com/2022/06/15/darya-tsymbalyuk-erasure-russian-imperialism-my-research-on-donbas/.

Vorbrugg, Alexander. 2019. "Ethnographies of slow violence: Epistemological alliances in fieldwork and narrating ruins." *Environment and Planning C Government and Policy* 37 (x): 1–16. DOI:10.1177/2399654419881660.

Yurchenko, Yuliya. 2017. *Ukraine and the empire of capital: From marketization to armed conflict*. London: Pluto Press.